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# A Creative Response to Food Issues during the COVID19 lockdown: Singing Out the Anger

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## Introduction

Food is an identifier and maker of class, culture and civilization (Coveney, 2014, p2) and its symbolic potential is powerful, both individually and collectively within society. Yet, because food sits at the intersection of multifarious disciplines, it feeds into a highly complex and often contradictory, nuanced and politically-driven social justice discourse. COVID-19 and the 2020 “lockdown” has ‘shone a light’ on all that is precarious within our food and health systems. The pandemic, which has been termed a ‘crisis on a crisis’, has forced yet more people into food insecurity (Loopstra, 2020) suggesting a further accentuation of social and nutritional inequalities when it comes to food access and availability. The aftermath of the pandemic is set to have catastrophic global implications, with long term social and economic consequences projected to reach ‘humanitarian disaster’ levels (Lancet, 2020).

As a Registered Dietitian, I have often felt ill-equipped to deal with the many complexities surrounding food, nutrition and social justice discourses – but this COVID-19 lockdown era has heightened this sense of dissonance for me. For example, the recent ‘covid media noise’ around food: “middle class social media images of sourdough baking, youtube cook-alongs, and zoom dinner parties, through to media coverage of food bank volunteers, food for nurses, and so-called panic food buying and stockpilers” (Swan 2020) suggests the branded slogan of solidarity *We’re all in this together* is far from the lived reality.

How does one navigate this plethora of food commentaries that continue to emerge? My frustrations are transmuting into a dynamic yet tangible creative pursuit that serves to evolve my ongoing food/nutrition research using creative arts-based methods to explore how we can better ‘give voice’ to perspectives on food issues that often remain absent from food policy and practice debates (See Pettinger et al., 2017; 2018; 2019). My recent concept ‘The Singing Dietitian’ offers one possible approach to sharing socially impactful food/nutrition narratives. During lockdown, I have chosen to ‘sing out my anger’ - by writing food-themed songs that relate to my observations of the COVID-19 situation. I have attempted to express my unresolved frustrations, driven by a sense of social responsibility towards the truth behind the complex social food/nutrition matrix as I see it [a 50year old white, middle class, British/European professional woman (she/her) with 20 years dietetic/public health nutrition experience]. This is my modest way of carving out a space for myself to cultivate my own style of ‘speaking out’ as a food justice activist.

This paper aims to appraise the effectiveness of song writing as my creative critical response to the COVID-19 crisis. I will use my recently written auto-ethnographic food song lyrics (Box 1 and 2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eFKxkXUvhZ8> ) to critically reflect on the ongoing complexities and recently exposed COVID-19 related food justice issues. Within this article, I propose song/writing as one way of enabling different forms of knowing and its potential to generate more awareness of nutritional/health and equity issues and activism. By

critiquing my song lyrics, using reflexivity to draw on my own and other scholars' critical insights, I reveal this approach as an accessible tool to express powerful topical food narratives within a social justice context that I believe have potential to connect people, thus supporting radical change and social transformation.

**Feeds filled with sourdough  
and workers on furlough  
fed on tinned food charity.  
This is the reality of pandemic inequality  
in a broken food system.**

**#Covid19UK #foodinequality #foodsystem  
#PandemicPoems**

Figure 1. Food poem tweet (Sandover, 2020)

## I prove my sourdough

I wrote this song to exemplify the complex and often polarized nature of food issues across the socio-economic spectrum, which have been heightened by COVID-19. The song was inspired by a colleague who responded to my 'straw poll' via Twitter appealing for COVID-19 food song lyric ideas – she came back with a poem (Figure 1), which provided my creative springboard (Sandover, 2020).

For ease of structure, the song is split into two parts: Box 1 lyrics relate to the nature of the lived experiences of lockdown – mine are different from those lived by individuals who are in a lower social position and less 'food secure' – living such different lives, yet at the same time knowing that certain aspects connect us, e.g. alcohol consumption/other addictions/comfort eating and childcare & family needs/labour. My privilege is called into question, creating heightened emotional reflections of these inequities. I am being flippant and ironic at times, in a way mocking the irony of my feelings of guilt around my own privilege. Firstly I critique *food insecurity (gender, class and race) and privilege*. Then (Box 2 lyrics), I appraise the long term nature of food/health inequalities, this story is old – *our broken food system* continues to fail those most in need. But note, I show optimism here - despite years of public health dietetic practice, I still have hope and believe strongly that social change is possible. Thus the suggestion for progressive solutions and possible transformation through simple creative connective activities, where dietitians and nutrition professionals have important potential roles. These are all highly nuanced food/nutrition topics in their own right, but through song, they seem simplified, yet in-depth creative critique is possible, as follows.

*"I prove my sour-dough,  
you carve your corned beef;  
and we're sitting here,  
polarised,  
yet both desperate for relief..."*

*But the offie's open late now  
Gin & Tonic number 8 now*

*You queue around the corner for grub  
I worry about my veg growing tubs  
and it Feels so unfair and unjust  
I drink green tea,  
You're so hungry*

*But KFC's just opened late now  
And we're all heading for a break down, Lockdown*

*Those hunger pangs must hurt so much,  
you've been dying to be nourished for a long long time,  
but the foodbank service makes you nervous.  
This moment's brought us all to our knees,  
this moment with family to please,  
and a risk of diet related disease  
mortality"*

Box 1 – Verse 1&2 (Pettinger 2020) see  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eFKxkXUvhZ8>

## On Food insecurity

The literature on food insecurity is too vast to cover in detail, but I want to draw here on what I consider an important paradox, especially for nutrition professionals, who may not be so well versed in the wider eco-socio-political structural influences, in which food 'choices' are made. Why are there such substantial levels of food insecurity present in developed affluent countries? Long et al., (2020) provide a comprehensive review suggesting two major causes of food insecurity in the advanced nations: economic inequality and neoliberalism. In simple terms, the latter affects the former, via increased unemployment and decreased social welfare benefits, thus exacerbating poverty and inequality. Further critique postulates that the relationship between neoliberalism, poverty and food insecurity is, indeed, so nuanced that it actually impacts on the ability of a community to self-organise and become resilient (Blake, 2019). I find this highly relevant in relation to COVID-19, whereby the already unequal structures in our modern societies have brought communities to their knees, with a growing recognition of unequal nutritional health and fragmented/insufficient welfare provision, particularly

affecting vulnerable individuals, e.g. newly unemployed (furlough), households with children, people with health conditions and disabilities (Barker and Russell, 2020), and most notably ethnic minority groups (Power et al 2020), illuminating stark racial disparities (Alkon et al 2020).

*"This moment's brought us all to our knees,  
this moment with family to please,  
and a risk of diet-related disease mortality"*

Moreover, females are reported to be more at risk than males of food insecurity (Matheson and McIntyre, 2014), specifically those with children, highlighting underlying gender issues. A large proportion of foodbank users are reportedly women (Prayogo et al., 2018) and in particular those on lower incomes (Morris et al., 2014), who also struggle to afford 'healthy eating' (Scott et al., 2018). Indeed, in relation to 'food work', intersectional feminists insist on the significance of gender in addition to class and race inequalities and labour during the pandemic (see Swan, 2020). Of importance here, is the role women play in performing paid, unpaid and emotional labour (Thompson, 2020), taking on new responsibilities, without any alleviation of their existing responsibilities, or extra benefits or concerns for their well-being and established through gendered, raced and classed power relations of governing during the pandemic (McLaren et al., 2020).

*"Those hunger pangs must hurt so much,  
you've been dying to be nourished for a long long time,  
but the foodbank service makes you nervous"*

As nutrition professionals, we know that poor nutritional status is a key determinant of food insecurity, often noted in those attending food banks (Barker et al., 2019). This can affect life-expectancy and immunity (Health Foundation, 2020) as well as diminished mental health and wellbeing (Tarasuk et al., 2013). Inequity is a known cause of malnutrition and is linked to worse COVID-19 outcomes (Nabarro, 2020). The virus is, therefore, likely to increase the nutritional vulnerability of already vulnerable groups, exacerbating diet-related inequalities. This may have both short-term and longer term implications for wellbeing and equity (Health Foundation, 2020).

As we hear of continued and increased demand being placed on emergency food aid systems (Caraher and Furey, 2018) to feed those who are food insecure, we need to consider the political and ethical debates this

presents (Williams et al., 2016), particularly in light of COVID-19, whereby the fragility of food aid in terms of volunteers, food supply and premises is highlighted (Power et al., 2020). Indeed the government's reliance on the voluntary sector to feed the food insecure has led to a financial crisis within the charitable sector itself (Barker and Russell 2020). The larger food banks and charities tend to be those with corporate partnerships, calling into question the ethics of food charities (Riches, 2018). Fisher (2020) states "charity has become the governing metaphor of the pandemic response, replacing justice, which itself has been placed on a ventilator" i.e. COVID-19 is being seen to reinforce the 'Hunger Industrial Complex' previously exemplified by Fisher (2017, p 262). The band aid approach of the charitable food sector largely fails to address the root cause of hunger and thus the sector perpetuates its own continuation and growth (Williams et al., 2016).

*"You queue around the corner for grub  
I worry about my veg growing tubs  
and it Feels so unfair and unjust"*

Douglas et al., (2015) explain that food bank use is often necessitated after severe financial shock, resulting in great emotional challenges, yet considerable resourcefulness in managing donated food items carefully. This process affects ideological practices, moral 'laws' which in the case of food insecurity can lead to feelings of shame and guilt (Swales, 2020). Goffman's (1963) definition of stigma as "a deeply discrediting attribute that globally devalues an individual" relates to the stigma of hunger as a double burden: the economic burden of trying to put food on the table and the psychological burden of knowing that society stigmatizes you as deviant, abnormal, and a bad citizen (Se Souza, 2019, p24). DeSouza (2019, p22) further specifies 'neoliberal stigma' as a concept which considers the wider contemporary political and economic contexts in which the voices of the hungry are foregrounded as they emerge within systems, organisations and other voices of privilege.

## On Foodways and Privilege

*"Take off the blind fold, this story's old,  
We're living a nightmare truth be told  
Your kids are all starving - fuelled by fear  
While I bake my bread and ferment my kefir"*

These lyrics speaks of the despair and 'stolen' dignity that come with hunger. I have, only recently, started the challenging task of fully critically interrogating my

own privilege [and whiteness - #blacklivesmatter], understanding the many systems of oppression that support my position. Am I the 'good white woman' that De Souza (2019, p97) so eloquently appraises - doing good and engaging in self-sacrifice to confirm my identity? Altruism, kindness and care, I have learnt, however, coincide with racism, paternalism and systems of poverty governance. The food movement, and indeed the dietetic/nutrition profession workforce, (White, 2013) most often reflects white, middle class interests, and can ignore or even reject the interests and cultural histories of diverse populations when establishing what constitutes 'good food' (Moore and Swisher, 2015). This makes me very uncomfortable, especially in the knowledge that COVID-19 has illuminated the classism and racism already embedded within our unequal food system (Alkon et al., 2020). Parsons (2016) further confirms the importance of class and gender intersectionalities in relation to privilege, suggesting that striving for 'healthy foodways' when feeding the family, which, in effect "pathologises the poor working class" (Parsons, 2016, p384), has become a way to establish elite status and cultural capital for middleclass women in the UK. Yet, as health advocates (e.g. dietitians), policy makers, and food activists strive to improve nutrition and food access across racial and ethnic divides, established approaches seem to be missing the fundamental structural pathways for actually improving health and justice (Cachelin et al., 2019).

My discomfort, therefore, is down to my realisation that we are all complicit. This new planetary epoch *the virocene*, ushered by COVID-19 (Fernando, 2020), necessitates a deeper understanding of vulnerability to avoid recreating a 'new normal' that normalizes the current oppressive social order, whilst inhibiting our ability to transform the world. Resistance to and disruption against these various systems of oppression, however, brings me a glimmer of hope for social change. My ability to be reflexive, [critical dietetics/praxis through song], I believe, goes some way to reinforce my commitment to anti-oppression (Brady and Gingras, 2019) which in turn, strengthens my desire to use my privilege, and professional status, more effectively to support the necessary transformational change.

*Take off the blind fold, this story's old,  
We're living a nightmare truth be told  
Your kids are all starving - fuelled by fear  
While I bake my bread and ferment my kefir*

*For our health it is too late now  
So we stuff ourselves with cake now*

*We're out of touch,  
much too much  
This food system has been broken for a long long time  
Shiver quiver  
Non-deliver*

*This moment we are all unsure  
This moment we've been waiting for  
A fairer system that's worth fighting for  
Fighting for now*

*Leave out your judgement  
Feel the fear  
Let's come together  
Far and near  
Sing me your food song  
And I'll hold your hand  
Lets share our stories  
RE-Connect with the land*

*Cos for us its not too late now  
We just need a little faith now*

Box 2 – verse 3&4 (Pettinger 2020) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eFKxkXUvhZ8>

## Fixing our broken food system

*"We're out of touch,  
much too much  
This food system has been broken for a long long time  
Shiver quiver  
Non-deliver  
This moment we are all unsure  
This moment we've been waiting for  
A fairer system that's worth fighting for  
Fighting for now"*

Our industrial food system is distorted by inequalities of access, failing the people most in need. More than enough food is generated, yet half the global population is malnourished and/or deficient in key micronutrients (see Pettinger, 2018). The implementation of creative solutions to address this is a pressing global challenge, especially in light of COVID-19 (Nabarro, 2020).

My vision is for a food system where the values of health, society and the ecosystem are of equal importance (Carlsson et al., 2019). Critical food justice scholars use a more expansive lens to suggest that a 'bottom-up' democratised food system is needed (Cachelin et al., 2019). This requires systemic change that embraces diversity and respects the variability in foodways ('choices') within our society. Such a model would liberate both the underrepresented and underserved, advocating *with* rather than *for* disadvantaged communities, as well as the elite, and the result will be more equitable and lasting solutions to complex social problems in the food system (Moore and Swisher, 2015). It would also present new opportunities for dietitians and nutrition professionals (Pettinger 2018; Carlsson et al., 2019).

Engaging citizens in the complex food connections that shape their wellbeing is, however, challenging. Roe and Buser (2016) argue the need for arts-based participatory activities, formed through food's agentive potential, to support collaborative ecological citizenship. In a way, using creative food activities as a means for enhancing and rebuilding self-organising community capacity (Blake, 2019).

Dietitians are trained as experts in communicating nutrition messages. Yet their ability to challenge traditional approaches remains under-developed. The art of dietetics calls for more 'creative critical thinking' (Dhami and Brady 2017) and practice to enable us to engage and lead as change makers. My 'Singing Dietitian' concept aims to disrupt and dislodge my fixed ways of thinking and living that feed into the complicated food/health systems in which I know I am complicit. By using controversial food topics to perform, and potentially share with communities and students, ongoing 'embodied engagement' will produce and communicate shared food knowledge with political potency (Street, 2012), accessible and evocative outputs, and emotionally compelling experiences for audiences and listeners (Carless and Douglas, 2017).

## Singing out the anger

*"Sing me your food song  
And I'll hold your hand"*

There has never been a more opportune moment to 'get creative'! I am critically reflecting on COVID-19 lived experiences through song because "visibility, validation

and sense-making are vital to collective action, and contribute to individual healing" (Aphramor, 2020). Arts based methods offer emancipatory approaches to health research with the potential to promote social justice (Fraser et al., 2019), thus challenging more traditional positivist/reductionist 'biomedical' approaches for nutrition professionals.

*"It is through first-hand accounts that lives and circumstances become known, providing opportunities for understanding the meanings that people make of their experience(s), as well as the impact of this meaning-making on their lives and the lives of others" (Parsons and Chappell, 2020, p xiii)*

Autobiographical and ethnographical approaches have enabled me to tell my own reflexive COVID-19 food story. Through these essential methods, I have expressed a different form of knowing and come to terms with some of my frustrations. By doing this, I have also exposed my own vulnerabilities and generated awareness of nutritional/health and equity issues by speaking truth to power. This experience has revealed critical dimensions of social qualitative inquiry that I have not adequately explored, but I believe may provide conditions for personal and professional growth. Music/song has allowed me to communicate in expressive ways, as Katrina Douglas exemplifies:

*"As a reflexive tool, songs help us, help me...in an embodied way, retrace the steps that formed my narrative identity, and in the same moment, remind me, remind us, of the heritage, tradition, and the history that birthed them. And so, as an inquirer, I use songs to reach out, reach back, and reset my moral compass. I do this because music can aid the humanizing move which turns 'thick description' into 'thick empathy'. It provides a means to express things we don't know how to articulate in words, and to move toward an imaginative aesthetic that transcends the 'problem' of silence" (Douglas, 2016, p800)*

I propose the use of song/writing, therefore, as an accessible tool for critical reflection and engagement in controversial food/nutrition discourse that can potentially lead to social transformation. Its potential utility extends from dietetic/health professional practice and nutrition education, to community settings, to enable creative connections and compassionate knowledge mobilisation and, as a result, activism.



## Let's come together

*"Leave out your judgement*

*Feel the fear*

*Let's come together*

*Far and near*

*....Lets share our stories*

*RE-Connect with the land*

*Cos for us its not too late now*

*We just need a little faith now"*

We all have a role to play in dismantling these unfair and complicated systems. My final verse offers hope, that by coming together, we can connect and share solutions. I believe that by engaging individuals, communities and other key players, we can shift the paradigm towards more relational and transformative socially inclusive food system research and action with human connection at its heart (Cottam, 2018). Creative approaches can empower a wider range of individuals to share their 'lived food experience' narratives (Pettinger et al., 2019; Pettinger and Howard, 2020), building relationships and corroborating a co-productive philosophy.

As dietitians and nutrition professionals, we already have a range of essential transferable skills and competencies. To amplify our visibility, however, we need to take risks, step out of our comfort zone and embrace new opportunities, perspectives and ways of learning/known/working/practicing. Using innovative approaches requires personal, professional and creative courage (Gilbert, 2015). This is a new scary space for me, but one that I intend to passionately pursue, because I believe it can galvanize self-compassion and has the potential to inspire others, thus leaving an important legacy (Aphramor, 2020).

This unprecedented pandemic era has heightened the polarized nature of food issues across the social spectrum and calls for us all to reflect and take action, so that we can navigate post-COVID-19 society to #buildbackbetter towards food justice and optimised well-being.

Creativity, in all forms, is an emerging in-demand skill that is set to become even more important for nutrition professionals post-pandemic. Let's use this COVID-19 nightmare as a catalyst for positive social change to realise a shared vision for a better and fairer food future, rebuilding social and cultural capital and resilience to future shocks.

My first recommendation is that we view our ever

growing pressing social, political and cultural issues through a more 'critical creative' lens, embracing the uncomfortable challenges that this presents. Secondly, we need to listen to, speak out and challenge inequality and oppression, to co-create informed and flourishing communities in which the diversity of individual difference is celebrated. By doing this, we reframe the narrative, bringing health, equity, environment and social justice to the centre of the debate.

Finally, and most importantly, we need to champion change leadership and advocacy. Our professional skillset already includes strong communication and empathic appreciation of our clients. More demanding perhaps is truly understanding the cross-sector needs and priorities of all players across the food system, but this is essential, to build rapport, trust and transparency and break down power barriers. Our holistic values now require us to embrace an adaptable, agile and flexible mind-set, and lead by example, focussing on collaboration, with people as assets, to build citizenship. Future strategies can be shaped through more creative engagement practices, such as the arts-based method critiqued in this article, because they harness energy, vision and skills development, thus enabling active agency and capability to be enhanced within communities. For moving forward into the post-COVID-19 world, this will permit integration of more progressive solutions to our food and health system issues, giving people a stronger voice to support the re-imagining of their own, more inclusive, co-operative and democratised systems.

## Author Bio:

Dr Clare Pettinger is a Registered Dietitian, Public Health Nutritionist and experienced educator, lecturing at the University of Plymouth, UK. She is actively engaged in community-focussed research around food systems, poverty and social justice. Clare believes that creative approaches are required to tackle current local (and global) health and social wellbeing challenges. See her University profile here <https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/staff/clare-pettinger>

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